

To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1201, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Number 2

July 1935

WHAT IS LAND?

By O. S. Morgan*

The definition of land is superficially simple. In plain words it is the solid as opposed to the fluid part of the earth's surface. In the country-man's thought it is the basis for producing plants and animals, for producing food, fuel, clothes and shelter. In the city man's thought land is the site and location basis of city enterprise. Land thus conceived is essentially area, length and breadth.

When we dig into the farmer's off-hand conception of land, the case is not so simple. Eventually he comes to fair agreement with the economist and the sociologist that land as he uses it is essentially all nature; namely, three-dimensional. That is, in the words of Professor Yoder, "Land includes not only the surface of the earth, but also what is below and above the surface—soil ingredients, minerals, rainfall and temperature."¹ This is merely a step from Ricardo's definition of land as "the original and indestructible powers of the soil." That is, land is a gift, besides being of fixed area. Henry George states: "The term land embraces...all natural materials, forces and opportunities..."² As Blackstone put it: "Land hath also in its legal signification an indefinite extent upwards as well as downwards."³ Professors Carver and Lundquist state that "Land in its broadest possible sense might be defined as the whole of nature, outside of man and the specific products of his own labor."⁴ In this broadest sense it is evident that our forebears of the Stone Age farmed the sea, chiefly, instead of the solid surface. Here land was essentially a hunting and fishing ground, with emphasis now on hunting, now on fishing—and no agriculture.

Professor C. L. Holmes states that "When a farmer buys or rents a piece of land, he not only secures the use of a certain area of space and the elements of fertility resident in the soil, but he likewise obtains use of a more or less favorable endowment of climate, slope and general natural conditions."⁵ That is, "the term 'land' (includes) all of the nature-contributed factors of production."⁶ In the 1934 Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, Dr. C. F. Marbut reinforces this agricultural viewpoint of land in referring to land as defined by "...three concepts...climate...relief...soil..."⁷

Land leads the quartette of the four factors considered essential in modern production. Labor, capital and management follow. There is no way of deciding in advance whether or not land is the most important. Given a hunger-stalked man with some skill in wringing food, clothing and shelter from land, the first requirement is arable soil, followed hard by capital and labor requirements. As population crowds land resources, the relative importance of the four factors changes depending upon economic, political and social standards.

1. Yoder, F.R., Introduction to Agric. Econ., 1929, p. 86 2. Book i, Ch.ii
3. Comm. 1767, ii, 18 4. Principles of Rural Sociology, 1927, p.264
5. Economics of Farm Organization and Management, 1927, pp.132-133
6. Ibid. 7. 1934 Yearbook, U.S.D.A., p.329

I agree with my vigorous colleague, Professor Tugwell, when he observes: "I think it fair to say that intelligent use of the land is the first criterion of any civilization."¹ This in my thought means primary emphasis upon management.

Our answer to "What is Land?" will depend in the final analysis upon the attitude we take individually and collectively toward what from one angle is one factor, namely, capital. This capital is nature plus all that man's accumulated wisdom has supplied. That is, it includes the other three--land, labor and capital goods. One type of management of land means drudging, sweating, slaving, fatalistic subsistence; whereas under parallel conditions with capital and management factors transformed by modern techniques land means a high level of living with the farmer's wagon hitched naturally to the stars.

Man with twentieth century techniques, according to the Forty-Second Annual Report of the Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station,² doubles the yield of continuous cropping with corn by using a simple crop rotation scheme, and trebles the continuous corn yields by rotation backed with intelligent use of fertilizers and lime. "Thus, with poor cropping, nature is a more important factor (56%) than man....Where a good three-year rotation including clover was used, nature was responsible for about one-third of the harvest and man for about 64% of it."³ It may be well to temper the pride of man somewhat by quoting Dean Eugene Davenport on this "man and nature" test. He states that "The farmer says, 'I raised this field of corn and one team did all the work.' But while they labored and while they slept there were at work, for every acre, around 150 invisible and silent horses (sun's energy) which never ate or slept but labored continuously and without drivers."⁴

Land as soil is commonly looked upon as the chief production agent in farming. But man is chief for he is at the controls. It is man who guides forces to produce the three or four utilities of form, time, place and possession.⁵ Sumner and Keller penetratingly observe, "The ultimate elements offered for a scientific study of the evolution of human society are Man and Land..."⁶ Shall we have the "vegetable civilization"⁷ with population crowding land as in Egypt, India, Java, China, and Japan? Or, shall we have the machine and the chemical⁸ civilization of America and northwestern Europe with land eliminated as a fixed man - land ratio? If the techniques in machinery and in chemistry have for the time being set the fear of national land shortage beyond the bounds of social and political concern, the happy condition has transferred stupendous problems from land questions to geniuses of mechanization and chemical formulation.

As land is meaningless without man, man is undone without land. Land ties in with the entire fabric of man's welfare, begin as you will with Adam or the Neanderthaler. But land as property came, says Professor Gras, "...so far as evidence is available, in the settled village."⁹ Good land may have come first as property of the family, while pasture and woodland of the village. But land was not at first owned by the individual as were jewels, weapons, and clothes. In this early village and family ownership of land lies the urge of reformers to

1. Tugwell, R.G., The Battle for Democracy, 1935, p.238

2. 42nd Annual Report of the Illinois Ag. Exp. Sta., 1929, pp. 12, 13

3. Ibid.

4. Davenport, Eugene, The Farm, 1927, p.32

5. Dummeier and Heflebower, Economics with Applications to Agriculture, p.75

6. Sumner and Keller, The Science of Society, 1927, vol. i, p.4

7. Zimmermann, E.W., World Resources and Industries, 1933, ch. ix

8. Hale, Wm. J., The Farm Chemurgic, 1934, p.53

9. Gras, N.S.B., A History of Agriculture in Europe and America, 1925, ch. xi

return to common ownership of it in the hope, it might seem, that the future Golden Age lies in excavating the sand-sunk Garden of Eden. Land as property progressed through several stages of ownership before it became free, individual ownership, subject to seizure only by the State.

Land as man's property is subject to the same economic, political, and social distortions as other owned utilities. Since land has become property, it has been taxed. Though I can not agree with Dr. William J. Hale that "Land by itself has little value,"¹ I do agree that from an economic standpoint, "The accursed real estate taxes are primarily responsible for the distressed state of mankind today."² By manipulation of price land values have been affected. By the control of politics the social welfare of landowners and operators has been complicated. Land tenure is a vital problem to the welfare of State, whether we consider this item historically or currently, whether in the U.S.S.R., in Italy, in Germany, in India among the Tamils, or in Kwangsi, China's "model province." Land tenancy is good or bad as determined by objectives and methods of government and translated by local powers and institutions.

Land is a teacher. Job had come to grips with facts when he concluded, "...speak to the earth and it shall teach thee."³ We can not make any sort of attempt to control land but "the still, small voice" makes its impression upon us. The impress is direct as can be. It is perfect if often as unintelligible as was the writing on the wall to Belshazzar. It is patient as a father but as stern as a judge. When the pupil learns the calculus formula of land, he finds that land speaks as supreme law. Having learned this much, law appears now as love. Discovering the law of land sets the pattern for discovering the Law of God. But I hasten to add that the unvarying law of land refers to nature, not man-made elaborations and institutions. Therefore the teaching dynamic of land (nature) lies, as I grasp it, in its fixity and infinite variety. The active mind in the environment of land, using its free as well as its economic, its direct as well as its indirect goods, can use to the full all the social, aesthetic, religious acquisitions of complex modern society. As our great modern naturalist and teacher, L. H. Bailey, states it: "It is one of the marks of the evolution of the race that we are coming more and more into sympathy with the objects of the external world. These things are a part of our lives."⁴

Land as a cure for the present economic and social disturbance is impossible. If man's attitude, sense of responsibility, to land can be improved, that makes for healing "the hurt of the daughter of my people,"⁵ not slightly but greatly. But that land, contact with land, private ownership of land, operation of land with predatory motive dominant can regenerate a nation, this to my way of thinking is impossible. Substitute the service motive and thereupon land use is healing.

To put on the land the common run of out-of-work city folk who do not know the simple A B C of land use is as futile as to put typewriter and supplies before a farm hand and expect him to write a William Allen White editorial. For proper land use requires a deep, albeit inarticulate understanding of this chief medium of man, land. And how can a man appreciate that which he has not truly seen? The great Teacher said, convicting the Pharisees of his time, "Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye can not hear my word."⁶ It is one thing to have a bent for a stroll or a hike in the country in lilac-time or in "brown October wood" and a totally different mind to earn two or three dollars

1. Hale, Wm. J., op. cit., p. 52 2. Ibid.
3. Job 12:8 4. Bailey, L.H., The Nature-Study Idea, 1905, p.14
5. Jer. 8:11 6. John 8:43

a day, day in and day out, through years on end, through foul and fair weather, drought, heat and cold. One is a vacation mind, the other is an occupation mind.

Land in its primary use is for the land-minded. Land-mindedness is partly endowment, partly environment. I have observed hundreds of men and women, young, old, with and without families, poor and rich, attempt the land-cure by way of the farm. If contentment on a practical farm is the standard of success, few back-to-the-landers attain it. If sticking to the country is the standard, perhaps one in four may be said to have succeeded.

There is reason to hope that after viewing the shocks of the past twenty years people of the present generation will prize land highly. If we as a people go back to a period of financial profit seeking, the present deserved popularity of security and living by land will fade out. If for the present the small family farm is put forward as ideal, then agricultural land will serve its highest social and political purpose. This is desirable for without disrupting revolutions the land in farms can become the medium of education in an approximation of an ideal way of living. Until the present, land has been used in farms too much as a sweating discipline of the body. What is certainly needed before land is made a public utility, or is factory-ized, is land as the iron-rod teacher of the rugged individualistic farm family. This puts hard up to the farmer and supporting social institutions the implementation of winning bread in the sweat of the brow (mind). To venture here into the specific, the farmer, especially in the Occident, can beautify his farm, mechanize it, scientifically plan and utilize it for production and home, all to a degree only roughly approximated by our Master Farmers. And I am not suggesting that the time will soon come when, for 125 or 150 million Americans, we shall need, for food and textiles, an area of productive land equivalent to less than two-thirds of the State of Texas.¹ A concrete description of what I have in mind is finely expressed by Warren H. Wilson in Rural Religion and the Country Church, 1927, where in Chapter 3, he gives us the thumb-nail sketch of "Spiritual Community Artists."

Land as a competing field for man's brawn as a draft animal pitted against beast or against a machine is out-moded in the West and is marked for ultimate out-moding everywhere. When a ton of coal can do the draft work of one thousand men, when man with modern technique is four hundred times as efficient as the human draft animals who built the pyramids,² it becomes obvious that man's destiny is that of master of, not slave to, land, to nature.

The concept of land that concerns me most is not that of natural land, nor yet of farm land, important as each is to existence while man tabernacles in the flesh. The all-important concept is that which makes man the wise, considerate, and artistic custodian of land resources. Man thinks, aspires; land does not. Man articulates spirit, the Christian spirit, through many media, including land. That is, we set land in its place when we Christianize it. Not Christianized, it is a Jezebel idol always asleep, always leading its worshipper to an Elijah slaying.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."³ That is, "Blessed are the non-predatory, for they shall inherit the earth."⁴

1. Wilcox, O.W., Reshaping Agriculture, 1933
2. Zimmermann, E.W., op. cit., p.65
3. Matt. 5:51
4. Weymouth, R.F., The New Testament in Modern Speech, 1909

*The above paper by Professor O. S. Morgan, Columbia University, was presented at the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the International Association of Agricultural Missions, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, March 15, 1935.

Membership in the Christian Rural Fellowship is open to all who are interested in its purposes as stated at the top of page 1 of this Bulletin. Membership entitles one to take part in the affairs of the Fellowship and to receive the Bulletins. There are four types of memberships: Subscribing - \$5; Contributing - \$5; Sustaining - \$10; Patron - \$25. Checks should be made payable to the Christian Rural Fellowship, John H. Reisner, Treasurer, and sent to Room 1201, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.
